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ABSTRACT

A study identified costs and benefits of different approaches to adult basic education (ABE) in Scotland and elements that contributed to effective delivery. Study procedures included reanalysis of results of a previous survey, interviews with directors in regional education authorities, a telephone survey of ABE providers, and detailed study of six providers. Providers were local education authorities, further education colleges, schools, employment training schemes, and voluntary agencies. Financial information did not exist to provide a full costing of ABE. Case study data were used to calculate these unit costs: cost per course, student, hour of tuition, and student hour of tuition. Participants paid higher personal costs on some programs in terms of the possible embarrassment of admitting they lacked basic skills. The most expensive item was the cost of professional staff; the most expensive schemes were aimed at nontraditional learners. Benefits were as follows: communication and computational skills, social/life skills, work-related skills, qualifications, further training, and employment. Effective courses included the following elements: a structure and philosophy that encouraged learners to enter, progress, and take responsibility for their own learning; a relevant curriculum; a variety of methods; tutors who built teaching and learning around what motivated learners; and continuing support and training for staff. Suggestions for improvement included open-entry/open-exit opportunities and innovative projects aimed at nonparticipants. (YLB)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE

Education Department

INTERCHANGE

No 10

Costs and Benefits of Adult Basic Education

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Costs and Benefits of Adult Basic Education

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Critical Skills Development, Edinburgh

During 1990 community education, of which adult basic education is an integral part, became the focus of national attention. The year had been designated International Literacy Year and an inspection by HM Inspectors was scheduled for 1991–92. To coincide with these two events, the Scottish Office Education Department commissioned Critical Skills Development to undertake a one year research project which would identify the costs and benefits of a number of different approaches to adult basic education and also the elements which contributed to the effective delivery of the service.

Adult basic education — a definition

The definition of adult basic education used in this project aimed to cover the different forms of provision which had been identified in Scotland. These included courses within regional community education services, colleges of further education, Training Agency Employment Training schemes, long stay hospitals, HM prisons, voluntary organisations and regional authority secondary schools. Adult basic education was defined as providing:

- basic skills such as communication, computation and life skills
- to adults
- in a way which is accessible and focused on the learners
- so that they would be more able to participate fully in society.

There was a sense that adult basic education was a cosy option, a kind of social event with people staying years and years with the same person.

Is this your experience of adult basic education?

The aim of the project

The study set out to explore provision for adult basic education within six Scottish regions and to answer the following questions:

- Who were the main providers of adult basic education?
- How were courses organised and delivered?
- Could examples of interesting practice be identified?
- What were the costs and the benefits of a number of different approaches to adult basic education?
- How was success judged by different tutors and learners?
- Did different ways of providing courses attract different people?
- Could the key elements which contributed to the effectiveness of courses be identified?

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Research methods

The research was conducted in two phases to provide both an overview of the different forms of provision of adult basic education and also detailed evidence of costs and benefits. During the first stage, the results from a previous survey were re-analysed, senior members of the directorate in six regional education authorities were interviewed and a telephone survey was conducted of all Employment Training managers, coordinators of voluntary organisations and a sample of further education college lecturers. The second phase involved a detailed study of six providers (located within three of the regions) which were chosen as examples of different forms of adult basic education. These case studies were:

1. One-to-one tuition in a regional authority community education service;
2. Small group work in a regional authority community education service;
3. Dressmaking in a secondary school;
4. Budget cookery in a collaborative project;
5. Employment Training in a private organisation;
6. Small group work in a voluntary trust.

This gave a range of different ways of delivering and funding adult basic education. The study involved making a total of 19 visits, interviewing 56 learners, 12 tutors and 13 coordinators and observing tuition on the courses.

Who were the providers?

The research identified a variety of forms of adult basic education, much of it hidden within vocational or leisure type activities. Local education authorities were the largest providers but other agencies such as the Training Agency have been making significant contributions in this area. There was evidence, however, that this was beginning to change with the new funding arrangements under Scottish Enterprise which led to a reduction in the number of providers of Employment Training.

Adult basic education is an aspect of practice in community education.

Should local authority community education services be the main providers of adult basic education?

Local authorities

The main providers of adult basic education were the local education authorities. Within community education, over 20,000 adults were engaged in improving their basic skills. In some authorities, adult basic education was organised by specialist organisers, supported by part-time organisers, tutors and volunteers. Volunteers were used in different ways: some providers relied almost exclusively on volunteers working on a one-to-one basis with learners, while others only used volunteers to help particular learners within a group setting organised by a trained teacher.

Further education colleges

Adult basic education was also provided by colleges of further education, with most offering SCOTVEC modules in Communications and help with basic numeracy within the college setting. Others were involved in 'outreach' work, sending tutors to work with groups in hospitals, prisons, adult training centres and community based groups. In one region, collaborative projects had been established whereby community based organisations, such as unemployed workers' centres, were given *academic credit notes* to purchase tutoring time from colleges.

The academic credit note given to the unemployed workers centre was a very cost-effective way of reducing the recurrent costs.

Do such collaborative projects result in the provision of adult basic education tailored to the needs of disadvantaged groups?

Schools

Increasingly, adults were being attracted back into schools which had spare capacity because of declining numbers of children. The resources, equipment and location of some secondary schools attracted many adults, especially women with children, back into learning.

Training Agency

A number of Training Agency funded Employment Training schemes made provision for those whose vocational training might be hindered by a lack of basic educational skills. Within the sampled regions, over 7,000 trainees on Employment Training programmes received help with basic skills. However, there was evidence that, under the new funding arrangements, training managers will find it increasingly difficult to bear the costs of this provision; the number receiving adult basic education on these schemes is therefore beginning to decline.

Other agencies

Other opportunities were offered by a number of voluntary agencies, many providing for the needs of specific groups, for example Linking Education with Disability (LEAD) for those requiring tuition at home or the Number Shop for those experiencing difficulties with number work. Additionally, it was thought that open learning and the media had the potential to reach significantly larger numbers of learners.

What did the courses provide?

'You build up confidence to sit down and write a letter; your pen begins to flow freely'

Does your adult basic education programme enable learners to make progress in both basic skills and confidence?

Most adult basic education was organised in the form of group tuition. Within secondary schools up to 20 adults could be in one group, whereas community based groups were more typically between six and eight members. The use of one-to-one tuition of adults by volunteer tutors as the only method of delivery was used mainly in rural areas where group meetings were difficult to organise. Other providers integrated the use of one-to-one tuition by using volunteers to support learners within a group setting.

Choice of subject varied: some providers offered courses which clearly indicated the literacy element in the curriculum and advertised *Return to study*, or *Brush up your English* courses. Other providers offered courses with a wider theme, such as *Dress making*, *Budget cookery* or *Word processing*.

Who were the learners?

One young man described his experience of adult basic education as; 'previously I was in a geriatric home, she (the tutor) comes here ...she's most helpful, it's like starting to learn all over again'

Should people with special needs be offered one-to-one tuition?

Within the six case studies, different people appeared to be attracted by different forms of provision. Women, especially younger women with children, were the largest single group identified and younger employed men were the least represented. This may have been related to the nature of the provision, the timing of the group meetings and the facilities such as creches which some providers offered. However, one group which met in the evenings was particularly successful in attracting employed men back into learning. It made no attempt to disguise that what was being offered was an opportunity to improve basic skills. Clients with physical disabilities, residents of institutions and recent immigrants expressed a preference for one-to-one tuition and were attracted into that form of provision.

What methods were used?

In adult basic education the curriculum is dictated by the students.

What are the difficulties in making the curriculum learner centred?

Many providers used an approach to teaching and learning which centred on the individual learner and his or her needs. Learners were interviewed before joining the course to assess their needs and expectations of the course. Individual programmes were designed and progress was reviewed against those needs. Even within the group setting, learners were able to pursue work at their own speed. Participants' life experiences were acknowledged and used by tutors to further individual learning.

Support was provided by tutors, volunteers and other members of the group. Much emphasis was placed on creating an environment which was not threatening, where learners could be involved in their own learning. Some providers offered *Learning to learn* programmes. Group tutors devised individual worksheets using materials which were relevant to the lifestyles and experiences of the group members and these were used to stimulate reflection and discussion.

What were the costs?

Financial

One of the main objectives of the project was to identify as far as possible the costs of a number of different ways of organising adult basic education. It became clear early in the study that the financial information did not exist to provide a full costing of adult basic

learning and a more limited range of recurring costs was used. These included the costs of:

- staff (teaching, non-teaching);
- administration (training materials);
- examinations fees;
- travel (staff and volunteers);
- subsistence;
- advertising;
- training (staff and volunteers);
- creche facilities.

Unit costs varied between £2.52 and £11.20 per student hour.

Have you identified the unit costs of your form of provision?

Information from the six case studies was collated using the above headings and unit costs calculated to show:

- cost per course;
- cost per student;
- cost per hour of tuition;
- cost per student hour of tuition.

The table below shows that for the six case studies the cost ranged from £2.52 to £11.20 per student per hour.

Costs of adult basic education provision (per student per hour) in six case studies

Organisation	*Course*	*Cost per student per hour*	*Excluded*
Regional community education service	One–to–one	£4.74	Creche, exam fees, teaching costs
Regional community education service	Small group	£10.78	Creche, exam fees, subsistence
Secondary school	Dressmaking	£2.88	Advertising, staff training, subsistence, travel
Collaborative project	Budget cookery	£2.52*	Staff training
Private company	Employment training	£10.43	Advertising, creche
Voluntary trust	Small group	£11.20	Staff training, travel for seconded worker

* This cost could not be broken down and allocated to budget headings.

Non-financial

In addition to the financial costs borne by providers, participants paid higher personal costs on some programmes than on others in terms of the possible embarrassment of having to admit that they lacked basic educational skills. The potential embarrassment was lower for programmes such as dressmaking and budget cookery than for programmes which were explicitly advertised as adult basic education. The personal costs were also higher in group settings than in one-to-one tuition.

Why did financial costs vary?

In educational projects the most expensive item is usually the cost of the professional staff. In this study, the adult basic education schemes which were based within institutions, such as colleges and schools, had lower unit costs because they were not as labour intensive as community based projects which tended to operate with a different method of education. The most expensive schemes, in financial terms, were the ones which attempted to reach the non-traditional learners. Much staff time was taken up in making contact with potential learners and creating a support system to minimise drop-out rates. Without this preparatory and ongoing work, it is unlikely that adults who did not usually participate in education would have been encouraged to join.

Attracting those who do not usually participate into adult basic education is expensive in terms of staff time and resources.

How do you reach these potential learners?

Different schemes spent varying amounts on training the tutors and on creche facilities. Some argued that without the latter, younger women with children would be unable to participate.

Some schemes placed a very high value on the use of well trained professional staff and that was reflected in the amount they spent on training. Organisers of schemes in rural areas had to allocate more for travel and subsistence. Projects which were attempting to take an innovative approach had higher unit costs in the start-up period. Costs appeared to be lower where providers were able to collaborate to make maximum use of available resources.

What were the benefits?

Both participants and tutors were able to identify different benefits in all of the six case studies. The range of benefits included obtaining:

- communication and computational skills;
- social or life skills;
- work related skills;
- recognised qualifications;
- further training;
- employment.

'When I go shopping now, I cannae get robbed — I can count change, I can multiply'

Should the learners set the indicators for assessing the effectiveness of adult basic education programmes?

After their courses participants were able to demonstrate real changes in their skills, behaviour and attitudes. They produced files which showed improved writing and understanding. They reported feeling more confident and also being able to undertake tasks which previously were beyond their ability. Some applied for jobs, others planned to continue into further education or training and many found they needed less support from the supportive services in society. Some were better able to support their own families by budgeting family money, shopping economically, cooking more balanced meals, making clothes, and helping children with homework. Those who were employed reported that they were better able to undertake the tasks required of them at work, such as

form filling, reading invoices and taking telephone messages, all of which improved their confidence levels at work. These benefits were supported by the tutors.

A summary of the benefits from the six different forms of adult basic education

Case study	*Type of programme*	*Main benefits*
1	One–to–one community education service	Social/life skills
2	Small group community education service	Communications; computational; work related; social/life skills
3	Secondary school	Social/life skills; computational
4	Collaborative project	Social/life skills; computational
5	Employment training scheme	Communications; computational; work related
6	Small group voluntary trust	Communications; computational

What factors made courses more effective?

A number of factors appeared to make some adult basic education schemes more effective than others at meeting their objectives. The most effective programmes were those where:

- the structure and philosophy of the programme encouraged learners to enter, make progress and take responsibility for their own learning;
- the curriculum was relevant and negotiated with the learners;
- a variety of methods was used, especially those which recognised and used the previous life experiences of the learners;
- volunteers were used to support individuals within a group setting;
- the tutor was able to mobilise group support for individual learners;
- the group size was optimal (in the cases studied this was eight);
- facilities and equipment were designated for adult basic education use and did not have to be stored away at the end of each session;
- tutors built the teaching and learning around what motivated the learners and the 'real' issues which concerned them;
- staff, both professional and volunteer, were offered continuing support and training;
- co-ordinators of schemes were able to demonstrate project management skills.

Putting resources into highly trained professional staff; volunteers — working under the wing of an experienced tutor.

Does this method contribute towards effectiveness?

How can adult basic education be improved?

There were different costs and benefits in each of the case studies. However, in order to maximise effectiveness, a number of recommendations can be made. Organisers of adult basic education should seek to:

- offer learners a choice based upon a pathway of educational opportunities with different entry and exit points;
- collaborate with each other in the design of the pathway in order to ensure that the available resources, both physical and human, are used effectively;
- ensure that innovative projects aimed at attracting those adults who do not usually participate are adequately funded especially in the start-up period;
- offer a variety of methods and not rely exclusively on volunteers;
- maintain quality standards by the use of self evaluation and review with learners, tutors and co-ordinators all participating.

Full report of the project

Maclean C, Wilson J and Wilson V (1991). *Adult Basic Education in Scotland: A Study of Costs and Benefits*. Edinburgh, Critical Skills Development.

Commissioned by the Scottish Office Education Department, the full report describes the research project which was undertaken by a research team from Critical Skills Development during 1990–91. The report will be of interest to those who provide adult basic education and wish to examine both the costs and benefits of the various ways of organising and delivering the service. The full report is available on request from the Research and Intelligence Unit, Room 4/48, Scottish Office Education Department, New St Andrew's House, Edinburgh EH1 3SY.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Purpose of adult basic education

Provision by local authorities

Collaborative projects

Progress in basic skills and confidence

People with special needs

Learner centred methods

Unit costs

Attracting those who do not usually participate

Indicators of effectiveness

Staff training and volunteers

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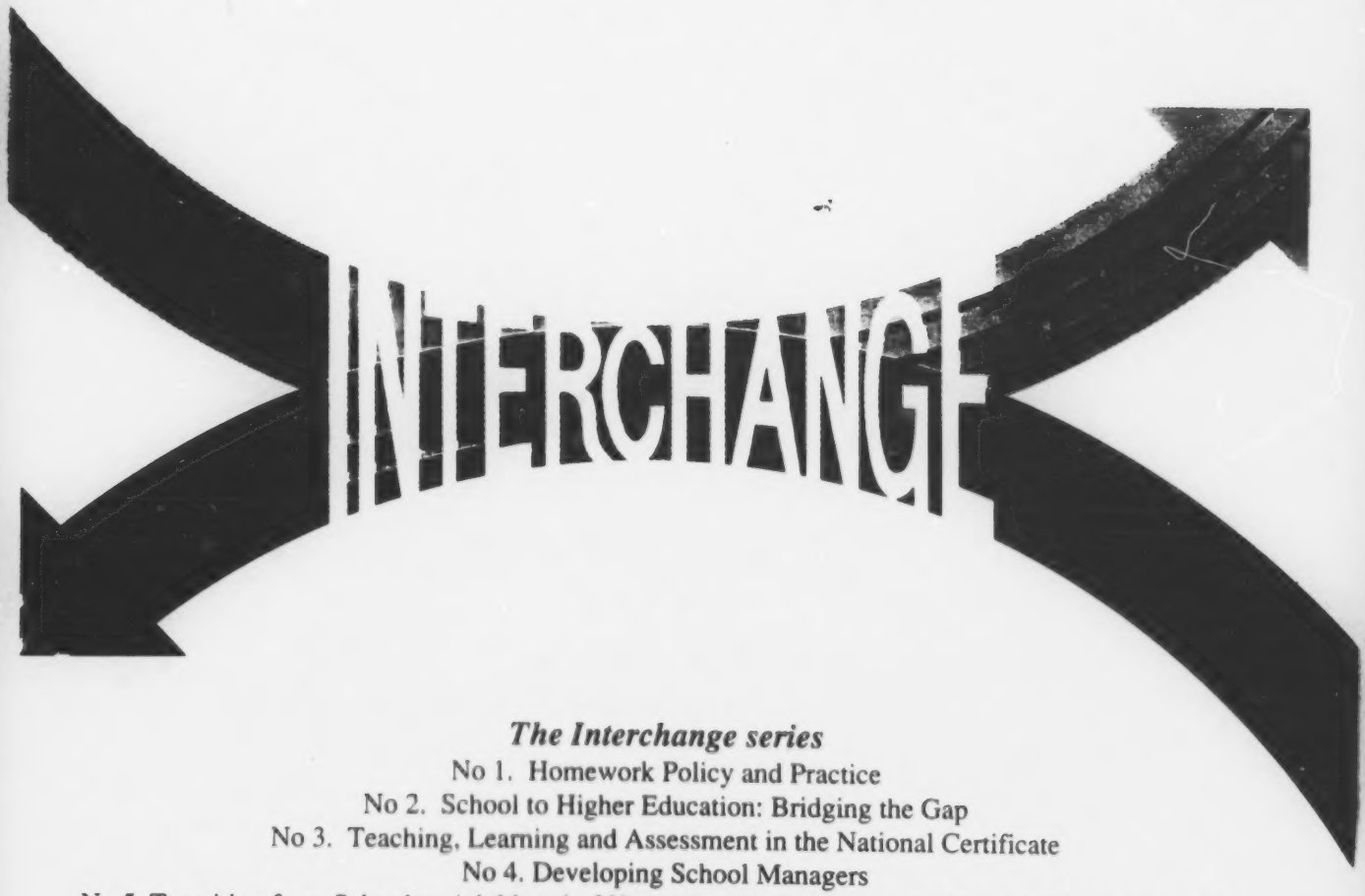

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